


# Focusing on Professionalism

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A priority objective for the Department of Defense (DoD) is to shape a high-quality, high-performing, and agile Defense Acquisition Workforce to deliver technologically superior warfighting systems to our men and women in uniform in support of America's national security.

Over the past year, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Frank Kendall has focused on this challenge and has implemented several initiatives to improve and professionalize our workforce. In some cases, we already have started implementing initiatives. However, in other cases, challenges and impact studies require a more measured approach. This article will address the successes and challenges of three initiatives that are targeted to improve the qualifications and prestige of the Acquisition Workforce by establishing: (1) higher standards for Key Leadership Positions (KLPs); (2) more relevant and professional qualification requirements for all acquisition specialties; and (3) increased recognition of excellence in acquisition.

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## Higher Standards for Key Leadership Positions (KLPs)

KLP standards are based on experience, education, and training. Current qualification standards place significant emphasis on certifications and less on relevant experience necessary to be truly proficient and an expert in a specific career field. In an effort to recognize experience as the most important attribute in acquisition career fields and establish higher standards for leadership, the USD(AT&L) is standing up Key Leadership Position (KLP) Qualification Boards with the main purpose of pre-qualifying senior Acquisition Professionals to fill KLPs. Pre-qualification would assist leadership greatly with talent management and succession planning, and provide a pool of qualified candidates for KLPs. Pre-qualification would be considered an “Elite” status. As currently envisioned, all who apply for pre-qualification may not be selected. The Board would be mandatory for all KLP positions with the exception of Senior Executive Service, General Officer, and Flag Officer KLPs. However, it’s important to note that it would only “qualify” the KLP candidate rather than “select” an individual for a specific position and would not be a “limiter” to promotion or command selection boards.

Those identified as “qualified” would retain that designation for 5 years; those currently serving in Key Leadership Positions would be grandfathered. The KLP Pre-selection Board will be chaired and governed by AT&L Functional Leaders and comprised of acquisition functional leads from Services, appropriate DoD agencies, and subject-matter expert incumbent KLPs.

The Boards would convene annually as a minimum with the Acquisition Senior Steering Board providing oversight. There would be conditions or precepts required prior to each board—for example: announcement of the board at least 90 days in advance of the convening date, standardized submission process, and endorsement of candidates by a Flag or General Officer. A significant consideration prior to implementing KLP Boards is determining the size of the KLP qualified pool—to remain elite, the pool cannot be too large. Many details still must be studied for this to be successful—details such as resources available to the boards, how to manage and track the pool of candidates, etc. Having a structured KLP qualifying process in place is vital to establishing high standards for our most demanding acquisition positions. The KLP incumbents today will become the acquisition community leadership of tomorrow.

## Strengthen Professional Qualification Requirements for All Acquisition Specialties

The intent behind this initiative is to ensure that everyone who touches acquisition in a meaningful way is qualified and proficient in the skill sets required to achieve successful acquisition results. By July 1, the Office of the USD(AT&L) Functional Leads, the Office of Human Capital Initiatives, and the Components had defined and finalized the skill sets required for each functional area; such as program management, systems

engineering; logistics; contracting; etc. The Defense Acquisition University next is to convert the competencies into on-the-job tools and processes to develop qualification standards usable by all acquisition workforce members.

The final phase of this initiative will be the Components’ requirement to develop and execute a plan to implement the qualification tracking and planning tools. This will then be documented to a Qualification Data Repository that will capture that individual’s credentials, providing the Services and agencies a structure and framework for achieving, demonstrating, and documenting employees’ proficiency by skill set. Furthermore, all captured data will be accessible to the individual, as well as the employee’s organization to enable analysis by both sides, thereby assisting in career planning while allowing flexibility among AT&L accredited programs to govern qualification requirements.

## Increased Recognition of Excellence in Acquisition

It has long been known that recognition of superior performance is a basic tenet and fundamental principle of good leadership. The acquisition community does not currently have in place a comprehensive awards program to recognize superior performance. Therefore, the assigned study group recommended that one be stood up. The study group found there are three components to proper recognition of the acquisition workforce: (1) incentives, (2) a communication plan, and (3) a Defense Acquisition Professional Distinction program. In these fiscally challenging times, with limited hiring and reduced bonuses, it becomes more important than ever for organizations to find opportunities to recognize their employees.

As part of the incentives component, a comprehensive review was conducted of the current acquisition awards program in the Services and Defense Agencies with the intent of putting in place a more cohesive process across the Department, as well as more substantial incentives. The team reviewing the awards program provided sound recommendations for adding awards in a tiered approach from the Component level to the USD(AT&L) level. The team determined that a comprehensive awards program must align with all the Services and Defense agencies with the “Best of the Best” competing for the highest awards at the AT&L level. The Awards Team also recommended adding a “Publisher’s Clearing House” award comprised of an on-the-spot recognition by the USD(AT&L) occurring during his site visits with the person(s) being nominated by their Service/Defense agency Senior Acquisition Executive. This is an informal opportunity for a command to recognize through the most senior acquisition executive the superior performance of employees in their workplace and in front of their coworkers.

The second component of recognition establishes a communications strategy that targets the Acquisition Workforce and is intended to highlight its successes, outstanding

performers, and background stories that focus on community developments and trends. The USD(AT&L) also has established a Defense Acquisition Workforce "Wall of Excellence."

The "Wall of Excellence" illustrates significant achievements and contributions of the Defense Acquisition Workforce and communicates the history of acquisition excellence. The wall was a cost-effective means of communicating acquisition excellence both internally and externally.

Other areas of announcing good news are USD(AT&L)'s website and Service/Defense Agency acquisition newsletters. All these vehicles must be coordinated and distributed properly to achieve the desired effects. The bottom line in all this is that we must have a comprehensive and coordinated program to get the word out when an acquisition professional or an organization does something good. Simply stated; we need to communicate the qualities, capabilities and achievements of the Defense Acquisition Workforce better than we do now.

The third component of recognition is under review and focuses on creating a sense of pride and ownership within the Defense Acquisition Workforce. It has been proven time and again that individuals identify with a strong brand. Branding will create a source of belonging among the Defense Acquisition Workforce. Some ideas under consideration are: establishing a professional association, designing and establishing qualification standards for earning an acquisition professional device to be worn on the lapel, establishing coaching and mentoring opportunities within the AWF, and enhancing acquisition corps qualification standards. Brands convey quality, qualification, excellence, and experience while imbuing employees with purpose and motivation as well as pride in membership to an elite organization. Creating a strong community with esprit de corps establishes a sense of ownership and professionalism.

Each of the three initiatives targets the professionalism and qualification of the Acquisition Workforce. It no longer is enough to simply check a box to indicate an individual has met certification requirements. Critical is a true understanding of the skills necessary to execute one's position effectively based on knowledge, experience, and education.

Seventeen percent of workforce members are eligible for full retirement today; 19 percent are eligible within the next 5 years. Combine the retirement statistics with the hiring restrictions and one quickly learns that the Defense Department Acquisition Workforce must learn to do its jobs more efficiently. It is incumbent upon all members of the

Acquisition Workforce to be subject-matter experts within their fields and strive for acquisition excellence. Leadership is determined to drive acquisition excellence through the three initiatives.

Improving the professionalism of the total Acquisition Workforce in Better Buying Power 2.0 is a strong commitment by leadership to raise the standard. The focus is on increasing each employee's experience, skills, education, and execution of responsibilities through a coordinated approach in Acquisition Workforce quality and professionalism. It is absolutely



essential that the acquisition leaders of tomorrow receive the proper training in their early careers so they are properly prepared to lead the Acquisition Workforce of the future. The belief is that a comprehensive recognition program, higher standards for key leadership positions, and pride and prestige associated with the acquisition community are essential to shaping a cost-conscious, professional, motivated, and highly effective workforce that delivers technological superior warfighting capability that enhances our national defense. &

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